

## Sestina on Limb-Lengthening Surgery

John's father was a famous novelist,  
his mom a musical sensation. In short,  
John was born with two silver spoons in mouth.  
A bright boy, he sailed through Harvard, then  
demonstrated  
valor in the Horn of Africa. A great  
career in politics awaited; the only  
obstacle was John's stature: he was only  
five-foot-two, puny as a sapling that lists  
whichever way the wind blows. For a great  
price, John secured the services of a short-  
spoken but skilled cosmetic surgeon, who operated  
on John's bones to make him taller, so his mouth  
could speechify from a loftier place. The mouth  
of conventional wisdom says that only  
females are vain, preening in front of crenellated  
mirror frames, making lengthy shopping lists  
of perfumes, lipsticks, skirts, and shorts;  
but masculine vanity is no less great.

My friend Millie, whose voice is apt to grate,  
but who has pretty eyes and a sweet mouth,  
helped me see why this is the long-and-short  
of the matter. She tells me that she only  
dates boys who are at least five-foot-ten, lest  
their offspring's height be too modest, too understated.

Where prejudices of this kind are indurated,  
it's no surprise that male vanity is great.  
The man I date, the man who tops the list  
of men in my life, with his honest mouth  
says that his brothers tower over him only  
because he is a twin: he has been short

ever since he, together with his short  
sister, inhabited their mom's trabeculated  
womb. He regrets his shortness, saying, "If only  
I were taller . . .," while the fire in the grate  
backlights the beauty of his face; his mouth,  
nose, eyes all vie for which is loveliest

to me. My stammering mouth replies at last,  
"My patient, John, could have been great if only  
a complicated surgery hadn't cut his life short."

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